

30 March 1986

U.S. reportedly raised aid issue with Honduras

By Steve Stacklow,
Inquirer Staff Writer

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — The United States last weekend invited the Honduran government to request military aid to combat anticipated border crossings by Nicaraguan troops, informed sources here say.

On Monday, Honduras formally requested the aid, totaling \$20 million, after an invasion by the Sandinistas had started. The request was granted the same day by the Reagan administration.

Suggesting that Honduras had approached the United States for help, the administration later cited the request as a major reason for the U.S. Congress to grant \$100 million in military aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels, known as contras.

Sources here, who spoke on the condition that their names and affiliations not be revealed, said the Honduran request for military aid was first discussed at a meeting here last weekend between American and Honduran military officials.

The intelligence reports discussed at the meeting indicated that a major attack by Nicaraguan forces against a contra base about 10 miles inside Honduras was imminent, sources said.

At the meeting, which the sources suggested had been called by the United States, the Reagan administration asked representatives of the Honduran armed forces to draw up a list of weapons and other supplies they would need to defend their country's border with Nicaragua.

The Hondurans responded with a request for antiaircraft artillery, small conventional weapons, helicopter parts, ammunition and other supplies, the sources said.

At least 1,650 Nicaraguan soldiers crossed a remote part of the southeastern Honduran border early last Sunday and attacked a contra training base, the sources here said. About 40 contras and 200 Sandinistas were killed in the invasion, according to U.S. and Honduran sources

interviewed here late last week.

Honduras acknowledged the attack only after it was disclosed by Washington. They were pressured to do so by the Reagan administration, according to sources in Washington.

The reluctance of Honduran officials to discuss the incursion was rooted in their consistent denials that Nicaraguan rebels operate from bases in their country, the sources said.

The Sandinistas, after initially denying the attack later claimed, in a Nicaraguan Defense Ministry communique issued Thursday, to have destroyed the U.S.-backed contras' main training center.

The communique, issued in Managua, put Sandinista losses at 40 dead and 116 wounded in what it described as "important battles" since March 15 at "various points of the Honduran-Nicaraguan border territories where mercenary forces try to penetrate our territory." The Sandinistas caused 600 contra casualties, including 350 dead, it said.

There has been no independent verification of the conflicting reports, and American and Honduran military officials have refused to grant reporters access to the area of the invasion.

By Friday, all but a few Sandinista fighters were said to be back in Nicaragua. The incident has been described here as the largest incursion to date by the Sandinistas.

Numerous smaller-scale border crossings have occurred in the past, including one in May 1985, sources here said. But none of the previous raids has been as highly publicized by the Reagan administration.

Last week's incident marked the first raid that the Hondurans have publicly acknowledged and the first time that they have requested American military aid to guard their bor-

der with Nicaragua.

Until now, the Honduran government has consistently denied that the contras operate within its borders, even though the rebels have maintained bases here for about five years. Honduras continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Nicaragua.

The acknowledgment of the incursion last week, sources say, may prove to be embarrassing for Honduras in light of its support for the Contadora peace proposal for Central America — a plan, if accepted, that would ban all foreign bases in participating countries.

Last week's assault by the Sandinistas was first disclosed Monday morning by U.S. officials in Washington. That afternoon, the Honduran government confirmed the border crossing and requested in a telephone call to the U.S. Embassy here and in a letter to President Reagan that the American military provide helicopter transport for between 500 and 600 Honduran troops to defend their border with Nicaragua.

The Hondurans also asked for approval of the list of military supplies they had submitted during last weekend's meeting, sources said.

President Reagan approved both requests the same day, agreeing to provide \$20 million in military aid.

On Wednesday and Thursday, 14 U.S. army helicopters manned by about 50 American soldiers airlifted the Honduran troops to an area about 10 miles from the main combat zone to take up defensive positions. The supplies are expected to be delivered during the next few months.

President Reagan's approval of the \$20 million aid package was consistent with a longstanding U.S. policy of assisting the Honduran armed forces.

Behind El Salvador, Honduras receives the second-largest amount of U.S. military aid in Latin America. In the last five years, the U.S. Congress has approved \$228 million for the nation, about half the amount the Pentagon has said Honduras needs to counter a large military buildup in Nicaragua. The aid has been used to train and arm Honduras' 16,000 soldiers, as well as to improve military

continued

airfields and to install radar equipment.

In return for the aid, the United States has been able to maintain a strong and very visible military presence here.

Between 900 and 1,200 American soldiers are stationed at the Honduran air force base at Palmerola. In addition, since 1983, the United States has regularly flown in thousands of American-based military personnel for elaborate military exercises.

This weekend, about 2,000 American logistics officers began arriving here for a troop-movement exercise at Palmerola that will run through Thursday.

In addition, groups of about 500 National Guardsmen, mostly from Missouri, have been working in two-week rotations on building about 12 miles of new roads in the north-central part of the country. The road work, which the Americans started in January, is expected to be completed by June. Several hundred U.S. Army engineers from Fort Bragg, N.C., also have been constructing a dirt military airstrip in Mocoron, in northeastern Honduras.

Sometime this spring, the number of American military personnel participating in military exercises or construction work will reach 4,600, according to Maj. Carl Gidlund, an U.S. military public-affairs officer.

"It's good for us to train with allies whenever we can find them," he said.

The CIA, which has received congressional approval to provide intelligence to the contras, also maintains a strong presence in Honduras, although American officials declined to discuss the size of the agency's force.

American officials are careful to emphasize that the Honduran government fully supports the U.S. military activities here. Announcements for forthcoming military exercises typically state that they are held "at the invitation of the Honduran government."

U.S. officials cite recent polls that show that 60 percent of Hondurans, who are wracked by poverty and high unemployment, support a continued American military presence in their country.